Bruno Forment (ed.)

(Dis)embodying Myths in Ancien Régime Opera

Multidisciplinary Perspectives

Leuven University Press

CONTENTS

PREFACE

Recent decades have seen a remarkable upsurge of interest in what was long declared the "dark ages"[1] of opera: the massive repertoire composed between Claudio Monteverdi's demise (1643) and Christoph Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762). Numerous Baroque operas are currently being rediscovered, recorded, and (re)staged, renowned conductors are investing their time and energy in unperformed (or 'unperformable') works, and singers of high caliber assemble record-selling recitals from arias by such forgotten composers as Antonio Caldara or Nicola Porpora. Now that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century opera have returned sound and safe from the library to the theater, where they belong, it seems that even the most conservative spectator is ready to adapt his (post-)romantic expectations to re-embrace, say, simple recitative and da capo arias.

Surfing this wave of enthusiasm, the editor of the present volume was given the rare opportunity to witness students and alumni from the Brussels Conservatoire revive one and a half hour of music from his doctoral dissertation on *opera seria*.[2] On 7 December 2006, seven talented singers and twenty instrumentalists breathed new life into two so-called 'cut & paste operas,' *Ifigenia* and *Ipermestra*, which were stitched together from excerpts in unpublished manuscripts (see the cover picture and Illustration 1).[3] As the titles of both one-acters betray, mythological narratives provided the binding agent between the selected excerpts. The choice of Iphigenia in Aulis and the Danaids was at once both deliberate and daring. In their focus on superstition and religious fanaticism, both stories – Iphigenia must be sacrificed for the

[1] Kerman 1988, 39.

[2] Forment 2007a.

[3] They were performed using period vocal techniques, instruments, gestures, and costumes. Paul Dombrecht was the conductor on duty, while Sigrid T'Hooft instructed the singers in historically informed stage performance.

patriotic cause; Hypermnestra is to kill her bridegroom on paternal order – fit twenty-first-century sensibilities like a straightjacket. Still, it is a challenge to confront an audience accustomed to the gimmicks and gadgets of the modern stage with *eighteenth-century* re-embodiments of these tales and characters. The experiment was refreshing, to say the least, and led to the conclusion that *opera seria* lacked a standard formula to represent even a specific myth – for instance, we found three composers endorsing as many different dramaturgical solutions to conclude the Iphigenia in Aulis, despite their libretti being adapted from the same tragedy, Jean Racine's *Iphigénie* (1674).[4]

<Illustration 1>

(Dis)embodying myths in Ancien Régime opera seeks to shed new light on the chameleonic appearance of mythology in musical drama between c. 1600 and 1800.[5] Indeed, opera in this period capitalized on the scenic potential of myth to no mean degree. At its inception, in late Renaissance Florence, the *favola in musica* (literally: 'fable in music') was almost uniquely built upon the crystal palace of Ovidian mythology. With the 'rediscovered' monody (*recitar cantando*) seen as a genuine equivalent to Orphic song,[6] the magical and healing powers of which were ascribed to extraordinary men, early opera staged the "ancient deities, such as Apollo, Thetis, Neptune, and other respected gods," but also the "demigods and ancient heroes," and in particular those "perfect musicians" like Orpheus himself, Amphion, or David

[4] *Ifigenia* contained excerpts from Antonio Caldara's *Ifigenia in Aulide* (Vienna, 1718; libretto by Apostolo Zeno), Carl Heinrich Graun's *Ifigenia in Aulide* (Berlin, 1748; libretto by Leopoldo de' Villati after a scenario by Frederick the Great and Francesco Algarotti), and Niccolò Jommelli's *L'Ifigenìa* (Rome, 1751; anonymous libretto). On their various conclusions, see Reinhard Strohm's chapter.

[5] The term 'Ancien Régime' was chosen for the sake of comprehensiveness: alternative labels (e.g., 'Baroque' or 'classicism') simply fail to encompass the stylistic breadth of the two centuries of operatic history dealt with in this book.

[6] See Tomlinson 1999, 17.

– the words are drawn from the anonymous tract *Il corago* (see Jean-François Lattarico's chapter).[7]

But the presence of myth in Ancien Régime opera was anything but uninterrupted or unproblematic. Difficulties arose from the very concept of 'myth' itself, which we today could define, with Mircea Eliade, as a "story of the deeds of supernatural beings" that "concerns a creation" and is considered "absolutely true" and "sacred" by its users.[8] When applied to seventeenth- or eighteenth-century opera, however, this definition proves unstable, if not inadequate. For instance, Pietro Metastasio's *Didone abbandonata* (1724), the most popular libretto ever to deal with the legend of Dido and Aeneas, introduces the supernatural in only an indirect, invisible sense (as Bruno Forment's chapter points out). Granted, the libretto alludes to two creations (Carthage by Dido and Rome by Aeneas and his offspring), the latter of which must have borne 'sacred' implications for Metastasio, Roman-born and a lifelong representative of *romanitas*. All the same, the poet cannot have considered the Vergilian story "absolutely true," for in his foreword, Metastasio acknowledged the concurrence of Aeneas' wanderings after the Trojan War (thirteenth century BC) and the establishment of Carthage (814 BC) to imply a "fortunate anachronism" – hardly a claim for veracity.[9]

The entire Ancien Régime was prone to riddling the status of myth versus history. In the absence of archeological evidence, mythographic method was dictated chiefly by historical, literary, or linguistic criteria. The tone for discussion was set by such studies as

[7] Anonymous 1983, 63: "Per cominciare da personaggi o interloquitori che la rapresentazione armonica pare che più convenevolmente abbracci, sembrano molto a proposito per le azioni profane le deità antiche come Apollo, Teti, Nettuno et altri stimati numi, come anche i semidei et eroi vetusti ... e sopra tutti quei personaggi che stimiamo essere stati perfetti musici, come Orfeo, Anfione e simili."

[8] Eliade 1991, 5.

[9] Metastasio 2002-4, I, 69: "Tutto ciò [of the plot] si ha da Virgilio, il quale con un felice anacronismo unisce il tempo della fondazion di Cartagine agli errori di Enea."

Abbé Banier's *Explication historique des fables, où l'on découvre leur origine et leur conformité avec l'histoire ancienne* (1711). And while confusion reigned supreme, the epics of Homer and Vergil were read as (semi-)historical narratives. In 1755, Gluck's future librettist Ranieri de' Calzabigi effectively considered Hercules, Theseus, and Ulysses as *personaggi istorici* whose persona equalled the status of "modern historical characters," such as Alexander the Great or Cyrus of Persia.[10] In 1793, the Italian translation of André de Claustre's *Dictionnaire de mythologie* (1745) continued to uphold the existence of "historical fables," that is, "ancient stories mixed with many fictions" about the "principal deities and heroes, of Jupiter, Apollo, Bacchus, Hercules, Jason, [and] Achilles, the historical background of which" was "derived from the truth."[11]

Did the epoch then regard mythology as a narrative corpus comprising *any* 'story that mattered to the community,'[12] regardless of ontological and phenomenological premises? If so, did it retain Aristotle's notion of *mythos* as a "plot" or "action" that could be either true or not, but at least accorded with opinion?[13] At any rate, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century notions of *favola* in Italian – the words *mito* and *mitologia* were less common – left veracity

[10] Calzabigi 1994, 114: "certamente Agamennone, Achille, Teseo, Clitennestra, Ifigenia, Tieste, Ercole, Ecuba, Aiace, Ulisse, Polissena, personaggi istorici piú antichi, non sono piú cantanti di Ciro, di Didone, di Alessandro, di Semiramide e di Enea, personaggi istorici piú moderni."

[11] Claustre 1793, 174, with emphasis added: "FAVOLE Storiche, sono le antiche Storie mescolate con molte finzioni [...] Tali sono quelle, che parlano degli Dei principali, e degli Eroi, di Giove, di Apollo, di Bacco, di Ercole, Giasone, Achille, *il fondo della storia de' quali è preso della verità*."

[12] The expression is Thomas P. Wiseman's, here cited from Ketterer 2009, 2.

[13] In *Poetics*, $1460^{b}36$-$1461^{a}2$, Aristotle noted that "The tales about gods … may be as wrong as Xenophanes [sixth-century philosopher who identified polytheism as the anthropomorphic projection of scandalous deeds] thinks, neither true nor the better thing to say; but they are certainly in accordance with opinion." See also Sommerstein 2005, 163, where it is argued that "the distinction between "myth" and "history" was, for an ancient Greek, far from clear-cut"; or Aristotle 1972, 122, where D. W. Lucas pointed out that Aristotle "believed that Greek myth, or much of it, was basically historical, or at least that names like Heracles or Achilles belonged to the class of *genomenoi*, real people, but that he distinguished between legends such as those of Troy or Thebes, and history of recent events like the Persian Wars."

aside. In 1612, the Crusca Academy's authoritative *Vocabolario* described *favola* in terms of "what is found to be untrue, but [is] sometimes verisimilar, sometimes not."[14] In seventeenth-century France, by contrast, the words 'myth' and 'fable' were disambiguated and split into two semantic compounds: a neutral, structural denotation (*plot*) and a vilified object of reference (*invented, fictitious tale*). Thus, Hippolyte-Jules Pilet de La Mesnardière's *La poëtique* (1639) held that the term *fable* pertained to the "Composition of the Subject matter" rather than,

> as some ignorant Poets imagine, to one of those ridiculous and incredible actions of the Gods of the Metamorphosis [sic] and of the Iliad, which the Latins referred to by the name *Fabulæ* and which we call Fables: far from providing substance to the Tragedy, such [actions] are more apt to incite laughter than provoke pity.[15]

In keeping with other detractors of mythology (or 'pagan' antiquity by extension), La Mesnardière of course wrote against the background of religious persecutions and the emerging rationalist philosophy.[16] His statement should alert us to the fact that myths did

[14] Various 1612, "Favola": "Dal latino *fabula*, trovato non vero, ma talora verisimile, talora nò …". Almost a century later, the Modenese rationalist Ludovico Antonio Muratori defined *favola* in his *Delle riflessioni sopra il buon gusto nelle scienze e nelle arti* (1708) as "che si dice, e racconta di qualche cosa; e la stessa cosa raccontata, e detta, tanto vera, come falsa, viene anch'essa nominata presso i Latini *Fabula* dal Verbo *fari*, e *mythos* presso ai Greci. Con parecchi esempj si potrebbe quì dimostrare, se occorresse, come da' gravi Autori sono state chiamate *mythos*, o *Fabulæ*, anche le cose e verità Istoriche." (Muratori 1767-73, VIII, 242)

[15] La Mesnardière 1639, 14: "la Composition du Sujet, où la constitution des choses … & non pas comme s'imaginent quelques Poëtes ignorans, l'une de ces actions ridicules & incroyables des Dieux de la Metamorphose, & de ceux de l'Iliade, exprimées chez les Latins par le nom de *Fabula*, & que nous appellons *des Fables*, puis que bien loin de servir de matiére à la Tragédie, elles sont beaucoup plus propres à exciter la risée, qu'à provoquer la pitié." See also page 42, where La Mesnardière contended that "la pluspart des Tragédies dont les Grecs & les Latins ont enrichi leurs Théatres, sont tirées de l'Iliade, où bien de la Thebaïde, meres du Poëme tragique; bien que nous n'ignorions pas que Troye ne fut qu'une bicoque qui ne merita jamais qu'on s'arrestât à l'assiéger, que ses deux Fleuves célébres, Xanthe & Simoïs, ne sont que deux petits ruisseaux. D'ailleurs l'Histoire de Thébes est si manifestement fausse en la pluspart des Avantures qu'elle nous fait passer pour vrayes, qu'il est fort aisé de juger que les plus belles Tragédies que les Anciens ayent admirées, ont des fondemens fabuleux, inventez, & mesme incroyables."

[16] For a more comprehensive treatment of this subject, see Bruno Forment's chapter and Forment 2010a.

much more than just 'matter' to readers and spectators, and that because of this their presence in opera merits re-assessment according to the sensibilities of the Ancien Régime.

Assuming a multidisciplinary but historically informed perspective on the issue, the six essays gathered here address manifold questions. Through what ideological lens, first of all, did librettists and composers perceive the ancient gods? What dramaturgies did they devise to represent – or modify – individual characters, tales, and themes? Were classic precepts obeyed, or precisely overridden? And how could myths be made to fit changing modes of spectatorship? Confident that no single discipline can cover the full spectrum of either myth or opera, we have invited contributions from an international cast of scholars active in – and if necessary transgressing – the fields of music, literature, theater, and cultural studies. Our selection, arbitrary as it must be, is focused on Italian *dramma per musica* and French *tragédie en musique*. It is subdivided into three thematic sections.

The first, opened by JEAN-FRANÇOIS LATTARICO, is devoted to the interrelatedness of opera, myth, and literature. In "*Lo scherno degli dei*: myth and derision in the *dramma per musica* of the seventeenth century," Professor Lattarico discusses the appropriation of the Greco-Roman pantheon by the Italian Baroque novel and libretto. He agrees that mythology initially monopolized operatic poetics, yet reveals how the hermeneutic treasure-trove of myth was rapidly transformed into a storehouse for poetic manipulation and parody, in keeping with the stylistic idioms of *barocchismo* or *concettismo*. Drawing comparisons between the writings of Andreini, Bracciolini, and the Accademia degli Incogniti on the one hand, and the libretti of Busenello, Aureli, Sbarra, and Corradi on the other, the author explains how Italian novelists and librettists embroidered the same myths and metaphors to represent the perceived decadence of mankind and to voice libertarianism on the writer's part.

ROBERT KETTERER's contribution "Helpings from the great banquets of epic: Handel's *Teseo* and *Arianna in Creta*" digs all the deeper into the meanderings of literary history to

show that neither of Handel's two "Greek-like" operas starring Theseus actually derives from tragedy or epic; rather, their sources must be found in a variety of models known to Handel's audience in London. *Teseo* (1713) is in fact modelled on Quinault's 'Euripidean' libretto *Thésée*,[17] yet its plot and dramaturgy focus consistently on Medea's melodramatic traits as portrayed by Seneca. *Arianna in Creta* (1734) in turn blends ingredients from Plutarchan historiography and, surprisingly, from the chivalric legacy of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Spenser; against all presumptions, then, it constitutes a vital chain in the series of Handel's romanesque operas from the 1730s (*Orlando*, *Ariodante*, and *Alcina*).

Dramaturgy transects cultural history in the second section. GEOFFREY BURGESS' essay "Envoicing the divine: oracles in lyric and spoken drama in seventeenth-century France" examines a trope inherent in the mythological machinery of the Grand Siècle. Combining readings from La Fontaine and Racine, next to other authors, Professor Burgess reveals the poetic and typographic conventions through which oracular pronunciations were distinguished from ordinary theatrical 'speeches.' Literary and operatic oracles shared a number of characteristics, such as a certain semantic opacity (if not incompleteness) and brevity,[18] yet from Lully's era onwards, musical oracles began to be uttered offstage by a disembodied voice exemplifying their irrational nature.

Professor Burgess' chapter is paired with "Addressing the divine: the 'numinous' accompagnato in *opera seria*," in which Bruno Forment analyzes a brand of accompanied recitative that was deployed to underscore invocations, oracles, and divine utterances. Easily recognizable by its 'halo' of homophonic strings, the topos would remain intact from the 1680s throughout the eighteenth century. All the same, its appearance in *opera seria* is at

[17] See Kimbell 1963.

[18] The enduring validity of brevity as a dramaturgical criterium for oracles is testified to by Mozart's decision to curtail the third-act 'Oracolo' in *Idomeneo* (Munich, 1781) – "If the Ghost in *Hamlet* were not so long-winded," the composer explained to his father on 29 November 1780, "he would be more effective." (Cited from Heartz & Bauman 1990, 29)

odds with the rationalist and religious discourse in which the genre was inscribed. That numinous accompagnati allowed composers to evoke Christian and pagan deities with the same degree of solemnity is striking even in light of the recorded hostility towards representations of idolatry and superstition. It is no coincidence that a growing number of instantiations of 'heathen fantasy' were apologized for in disclaimers distancing the operatic fiction from the author's 'true' beliefs.

Iphigenia's body appears in the footlight of the third and last section, whose majestic overture is provided by REINHARD STROHM's "Iphigenia's curious *ménage à trois* in myth, drama, and opera." Against the ingrained habit of regarding opera as a 'mythical' spectacle, Professor Strohm questions the distinctions that continue to be made between myth, history, and poetry on the one hand, and musical and spoken drama on the other. He scrutinizes no fewer than nineteen representations of the Iphigenia legend, conceived between 1640 and 1737 in four different languages, to highlight the fundamentally eclectic attitude towards Iphigenia's theatrical 'past.' With authors recycling, enhancing, or rejecting previous options at will, regardless of generic and linguistic contexts, artificial categories do not seem to apply; rather, we notice various supranational traditions at work.

BRAM VAN OOSTVELDT's closing chapter "Spectatorship and involvement in Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride*" zooms in on the late eighteenth century and its salient preoccupation with the Iphigenia in Tauris. Opera reformers, he explains, took an active interest in the myth's constituent motifs, most notably the shipwreck and the maiden's audacity, to express modern views on the emancipation of man and the existential position of the spectator vis-à-vis the (theatrical) catastrophe. Using references to a wide palette of philosophical writings, Professor van Oostveldt shows Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1779) to mark a vital shift from distanced to involved spectatorship, thus exemplifying a central concern of Enlightenment esthetics.

CONTRIBUTORS' BIOGRAPHIES

GEOFFREY BURGESS is a freelance scholar and Adjunct Professor at the Eastman School of Music. An active Baroque oboist, he has performed extensively in Europe, Australia, and the USA with renowned orchestras such as Les Arts Florissants. His doctoral dissertation on ritual in French Baroque opera (Cornell University, 1997) won the Donald J. Grout Award. His book *The oboe* (Yale University Press, 2007; with Bruce Haynes) has become a standard reference work and won the Bessaraboff Prize from the American Musical Instrument Society. An earlier version of his contribution to this volume was presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Seventeenth-Century Music (Rochester, NY, 25 April 2009).

BRUNO FORMENT is Postdoctoral Fellow (FWO) at Ghent University and Lecturer at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. His essays on operatic poetry, music, and stage design appeared in international journals like *Early music* and the *Journal of seventeenth-century music*, and in the volume *Ancient drama in music for the modern stage* (Oxford University Press, 2010). He is the recipient of grants and awards from the Belgian American Educational Foundation, the Fulbright-Hays Commission, the Goldberg Early Music Foundation, and the Swiss Musicological Society. His chapter derives from a paper delivered at the twelfth International Biennial Conference on Baroque Music (Warsaw, 29 July 2006).

ROBERT C. KETTERER is Professor of Classics at the University of Iowa and former vice president of the American Handel Society. He is the author of *Ancient Rome in early opera* (University of Illinois Press, 2009) and the co-editor of *Crossing the stages: the production, performance and reception of ancient theater* (*Syllecta classica*, X, 1999). Recent publications include articles in the *Händel-Jahrbuch* and the *International journal of the classical tradition*, as well as a chapter in *Ancient drama in music for the modern stage* (2010). He read an earlier draft of his contribution to this book as Howard Serwer Lecturer at the American Handel Festival (Centre College, 28 February 2009).

JEAN-FRANÇOIS LATTARICO is Professor of Italian Literature and Opera history at the Université 'Jean-Monnet' of Saint-Étienne. He recently published a translation of Francesco Pona's novel *La Messalina* (Les Translatives, 2009) and a critical edition of Busenello's unpublished libretto *Il viaggio d'Enea all'inferno* (Palomar, 2010). He is currently preparing

monographs on Busenello and the Accademia degli Incogniti, both of which are to appear in 2011. Originally entitled "*Lo scherno degli dei*: mythe et dérision dans le *dramma per musica* du XVII^{e} siècle," his contribution to this book was presented in the colloquium *The embodied myth in the dramma per musica* (Brussels, 7 December 2006).

REINHARD STROHM is Emeritus Professor of Music at the University of Oxford and Emeritus Fellow of Wadham College. He has published widely on late-medieval music, eighteenth-century opera, and music historiography. His recent books include *Dramma per musica: Italian opera seria of the eighteenth century* (Yale University Press, 1997) and *The operas of Antonio Vivaldi* (Olschki, 2008). He is a corresponding member of the American Musicological Society, a fellow of the British Academy, and the recipient of various awards, among which the Dent medal of the Royal Musical Association and the Glarean-Preis of the Swiss Musicological Society. He read an early version of his chapter at *The embodied myth in the dramma per musica*.

BRAM VAN OOSTVELDT is Assistant Professor of Theater Studies at the University of Amsterdam, where he is working on technologies of vision and spectacle in the early nineteenth century. He is currently preparing a book on the concept of 'naturalness' in eighteenth-century French theater and drama, co-writing (with Stijn Bussels) a volume on spectacular culture and lifelike images in nineteenth-century Belgium, and co-organizing the conference *Waking the dead: sublime poetics and popular culture after the French Revolution* (Villa Medici, Rome, January 2011). His contribution to this volume was originally presented at the conference *The embodied myth in the dramma per musica*.

MUSIC EXAMPLES

ILLUSTRATIONS